

**Introduction
to Hebrew Linguistics**
(‘Inleiding Hebreeuwse Taalkunde’)
UvA, Week 8, April 20, 2012

Medieval Hebrew: *dead or alive?*

The Judeo-languages: *the real languages of the Jews?*

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Hebrew: prehistory and four periods

0. Proto-Semitic, proto-NW-Semitic, proto-Canaanite, and proto-Hbrw: *“The family tree: ancestors and relatives.”*
1. Biblical Hebrew: *“Did King David speak like the Bible?”*
Pre-classical BH, classical BH, post-exilic BH; Qumran Masoretic Hebrew = Tiberian Hebrew
2. Mishnaic/Rabbinic Hebrew:
“A spoken language written”.
3. **Medieval Hebrew: *“Dead or alive?”***
4. Modern Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew (Israeli language)
Haskala, language revival, contemporary IH
“Is it obvious that Hebrew is the language of Israel?”

Linguistic and geographic transition from antiquity to the middle ages

The language spoken by the Jews:

- Tannaitic period: Mishnaic Hebrew 1, Aramaic (Greek)
- Amoraic and early gaonic period: Aramaic (and Greek)
- Later gaonic period and middle ages: Arabic
- Since 9-10th century: Spanish, French, German, etc.

Medieval Hebrew:

Dead or alive?

No native speakers of Hebrew
& most varieties of Hebrew:
Is it a paradox or a necessity?

Medieval Hebrew: varieties

First dimension: **Time**

- **Gaonic period**: approx. 600 – 1038, in *Babylonia/Iraq*
 - *Byzantium*: Palestine, South Italy, etc.
- **“Classical” Middle Ages**: 10th – 13th century:
Spain & North Africa ; France & Germany
- **Late Middle Ages, Renaissance**: 14th – 16th century
New places: e.g., Southern France / Provence, Italy...
Post-1492: Tzfat / Safed in Palestine; Poland & Lithuania...
- **Early modern period, Baroque**: 17th – 18th century
Polish territories, Prague, Amsterdam, Italy, Thessalonica...

Medieval Hebrew: varieties

Second dimension: **Geography**

- “Ashkenaz”: approx. “the Christian world”
 - “Ashkenaz 1” (10th – 14th c.): Germany (& Northern France)
 - “Ashkenaz 2” (since 14th c.): Poland (& Lithuania)
 - “Ashkenazi Diaspora” (post 1648-49): Amsterdam...
- “Sepharad”: approx. “the Muslim world”
 - Spain → after 1492: Mediterranean area, A’dam, London...
- “In-between” areas: Italy, Provence, Balkan, etc.
- Else: Yemen, Persia, Central Asia, etc.
Karaite communities; Samaritan communities; etc.

Medieval Hebrew: varieties

Third dimension: **Genres**

- Poetry

- Piyyutim = liturgical poems; zmirot = para-liturgical songs
- Secular poetry

- Prose

- Religious literature: commentaries on Bible and Talmud, halakhic codices, responsa, mystical literature...
- Semi-religious prose (historiography, itineraries, folklore...)
- Philosophy, science (medicine, astronomy, linguistics...)
- Translation of the above (from [Judeo-]Arabic, Latin, etc.)

- Private documents

Medieval Hebrew: varieties

Fourth dimension: **Native tongue of the author**

- Late antiquity: Aramaic or Greek
- Arabic, Judeo-Arabic
- Judeo-languages, such as Judeo-Romance languages, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, etc.
- 19th century: (literary) German, Dutch, English, French...

Medieval Hebrew: varieties

Fifth dimension: **which Hebrew served as model**

- Biblical Hebrew
- Mishnaic Hebrew
- Talmudic Hebrew-Aramaic code switching
- Tibbonite Hebrew:
12th – 13th c. in Provence: Ibn-Tibbon family of translators.

+ stronger vs. weaker interference of native language.

+ conservative vs. innovative language use.

Medieval Hebrew: examples

Rashi's commentaries:

- On the Bible: pure Hebrew (almost copy-paste from midrashim)

ובשכבך - יכול אפילו שכב בחצי היום תלמוד לומר ובקומך. יכול
אפילו עמד בחצי הלילה, תלמוד לומר בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך
בדרך. דרך ארץ דברה תורה, זמן שכיבה וזמן קימה:

Germanic V2?

- On the Babylonian Talmud: Hebrew-Aramaic code switching. “Randomly mixed languages”? No! Usually Hebrew is the matrix language (*base*), into which Aramaic words, phrases, expressions, quotations are inserted.

Medieval Hebrew: examples

Problem: need for new vocabulary, especially in philosophical and scientific texts. Options:

- Broaden the *semantic field* of Biblical (or Rabbinic) Hebrew words with new meaning.
- Translate Arabic (or Latin) expression to (B or R) Hebrew.
- Use Arabic/Latin words with Hebrew characters.
- Invent totally new words.

Different authors/translators use different solutions. Which one will survive to latter generations? Who is influential? Which one is used in Modern Hebrew?

Medieval Hebrew: examples

Varieties of pronunciation:

- Gutturals (ν and η): surviving in Arabic speaking context, not in Europe. But ν in Italy, Netherlands: [ʕ] > [ŋ].

- “*Begad-kefat* letters”

- Vowels: vowel shifts

E.g., kamats: [ā] > [ō] (Ashkenazim, Yemenites; Tiberian H?)

[u] > [i] and [ō] > [ū] (Polish), etc.

- Vowels: diphthongization of long vowels:

E.g., [ō] > [ow] (Western Ashkenazi) [oy] (Eastern Ashkenazi)

[ē] > [ey] (Eastern Ashkenazi)

The Judeo-languages:
The real native languages of the Jews?

Judeo-languages: what are they?

What is a Judeo-language?

- Language spoken by Jews?
Well... not necessarily a separate language or language variety.
- Language written with Hebrew characters?
Well... language does not depend on script.
(E.g. Maimonides writing in literary Arabic language, but using Hebrew characters: is it Judeo-Arabic?)
- A typical language variety characteristic of the Jews:
 - Sociolect (“religiolect” / “ethnolect”)

Judeo-languages: why?

Why does a Jewish language variety develop?

- **Social segregation:** automatic and/or voluntary and/or forced, especially inevitable in the medieval society.
- **Earlier Jewish languages:** when switching to a new language, population may keep features of the earlier language. E.g., Judeo-French in Yiddish *bentshn* (< *benedicere*), *leyenen* (< *legere / lire*).
- **Vocabulary related to Jewish culture:** e.g., Hebrew (and Aramaic) words related to religious practice, folklore, gastronomy, etc.
- **Language of education, culture and prestige:** expressions from Bible, Talmud, liturgy... constantly entering the language via rabbinic elite. Elite imitated by others. Using Talmudic expression = sign of being educated.

[Open question: can Judeo-languages be considered as pidgin languages and/or creole languages? Ask me, if there is time...]

Judeo-languages: three phases

How does a Jewish language variety develop?

- Phase 0:
 - Jews settle down in a new country. Learn the local language, within 1-2 generations. (Exception: phase 3.)
- Phase 1: (e.g., Yinglish, Judeo-Romance languages)
 - Jews develop their own spoken sociolect.
- Phase 2: Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian
 - Jews develop their own literary language variety, based on colloquial language, written with Hebrew characters.
- Phase 3: Yiddish and Ladino
 - Sociolect becomes an independently developing language, after moving to a new territory.

Judeo-languages: examples

- Judeo-Aramaic:
 - Aramaic spoken in the antiquity.
 - Modern Judeo-Aramaic dialects.
- Judeo-Greek:
 - Hellenistic Jewish culture (3rd c. BCE – Byzantine times)
 - Yevanit (spoken in Greece until late 20th c.).
- Judeo-Arabic:
 - Varieties per country, similarly to dialects of Arabic.
 - Literary tradition in the middle ages: either follow the Arabic literary traditions, or write down (local) Jewish sociolect.
 - Spoken until today (mainly in Israel).

Judeo-languages: examples

- Judeo-Romance languages:
 - Judeo-French: glosses in Rashi's commentaries.
 - Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Provencal etc.
- Ladino / Judesmo / Judeo-Spanish
 - Independently developing after expulsion in 1492.
 - Arabic, Turkish, Greek, etc. influence around the Mediterranean. Major cultural center: Thessalonica.
 - Communities preserving identity separate of local Judeo-Arabic or Judeo-Greek speaking communities.
- Judeo-Persian
- Karaim. Judeo-Berber. Tat. Judeo-Slavic. Etc.

Judeo-language examples: Yiddish

- 11-14th c.: sociolect of (Southern) Middle High German.
- Hebrew, Aramaic, J-Greek and J-Romance inheritance.
- Hebrew and Aramaic: languages of rabbinic education.
- Since 14th – 15th century: gradual migration from German lands to Poland (& Lithuania) – Hence, Slavic influence.
- 18th c.: Poland partitioned: Russia, Prussia and Austria.
- Western Yiddish under German (and Dutch and Alsatian) influence, Eastern Yiddish under Slavic influence.
Yet, continuous contact and migration between the two.
- 19th c.: German and Russian as languages of education.
- 20th c.: Migration to US: English influence, and *Yinglish*.

End of the judeo-languages

- Smaller communities assimilating into larger ones:
 - For instance, Judeo-Slavic overtaken by Yiddish.
- Expulsions and gradual emigration:
 - End of Judeo-French: repeated expulsion of Jews from France, in the 13-14th century (final expulsion: 1394).
- Haskala: Yiddish considered as “bad German”, a “language without a grammar”, the “jargon” of the uneducated and superstitious Jews of the ghetto.
 - Population gradually switching: West Yiddish > Jüdischdeutsch > Hochdeutsch; Dutch Yiddish > Dutch; Alsatian Yiddish > French.
- **Holocaust & migration to Israel**: Judeo-Aramaic and Judeo-Persian dialects, Yevanit, etc. dying; decline of Ladino. Yiddish: (1) Charedi Yiddish; (2) College Yiddish.

Medieval Hebrew: dead or alive? The Judeo-languages: the real languages of the Jews?

- If so, then: Why is Hebrew the language of the modern State of Israel? Could it have been German, Yiddish or Arabic? Answer: next week.
- **Reading:** Rabin's book:
Chapter 9 (pre-modern) and chapter 10 (revival).
- **Recommended reading for the assignment:**
B. Harshav: 'Essay on Multilingualism'. 2008.

Medieval Hebrew: dead or alive? The Judeo-languages: the real languages of the Jews?

- If so, then: Why is Hebrew the language of the modern State of Israel? Could it have been...
- **Assignment:** 1897 Basel, First Zionist Congress.
Discussion: What should be the language of the new Jewish state? Each of you choose one and argue for it!

Biblical H, Rabbinic and Med H, Aramaic, Yiddish, Ladino, Arabic, German, French, English, Russian...

See you next week!